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Diana T Fritz 08/30/2006 04:41:26 PM From DB/Inbox: Diana T Fritz

Cable
Text:

C O N F I D E N T I A L ABU DHABI 03436

SIPDIS

CXABU:

ACTION: POL

INFO: PAO RSO LEGAT AMB DCM CONS MEPI P/M ECON

DISSEMINATION: POL

CHARGE: PROG

APPROVED: CDA:MQUINN

DRAFTED: POL:BTHOMSON

CLEARED: POL:AMAGLEBY PAO:HOLSIN-WINDECKER ADCM:TBARNARD

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PP RUEHC RUEHDE

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FM AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6730

INFO RUEHDE/AMCONSUL DUBAI 6371

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABU DHABI 003436

SIPDIS

FOR NEA/ARP, INFO NEA/PPD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/28/2016

TAGS: CVIS PREL PTER AE

SUBJECT: REACTION TO UAE STUDENT AL-SHA'ALI DETENTION AT LAX IMMIGRATION AND ACTION REQUEST

REF: ABU DHABI 3434

Classified By: CDA Martin Quinn, reason 1.5 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary: The detention and refusal of entry of returning UAE graduate student Saif Khalifa Al-Sha'ali at LAX on August 21 has generated a significant, although uneven, reaction (see reftel). All major English and Arabic dailies have covered the story, generally characterizing Al-Sha'ali's detention as an "ordeal" fomented by USG "profiling" of Arabs and Muslims. For many, this incident confirms fears they already had of traveling to the U.S. and is, according to some reports, a strong deterrent for families considering a U.S.-based education for their children. Other reports suggest that the incident is generating little discussion among prospective students themselves. The English daily Gulf News has generated more columns covering this topic than the other four major dailies combined, apparently due to the prominence of the Al-Sha'ali family and a family friend on the Gulf News staff. Comment from UAEG officials on the incident has so far been characterized by restraint. See action request para 7. End summary.

¶12. (C) Saif Khalifa Al-Sha'ali, son of Khalifa Al-Sha'ali (dean of the Faculty of Law at Ajman University and former Chief of the Ajman Police) and nephew of Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Mohammad Hussain Al-Sha'ali, was detained along with his wife and three children (two of whom are American citizens) at LAX upon their arrival on August 21. Al-Sha'ali was returning to his PhD program at Claremont University in Los Angeles. He was offered voluntary withdrawal at the port of entry, which he accepted, and returned to London on Aug 22 after a reported 26 hours in detention. UAE Ambassador to the U.S. Saqr Qobash has been credited in press reports with making a timely intervention on behalf of Al-Sha'ali.

¶ 3. (SBU) The Gulf News first reported the story on Aug 24, continuing to publish front page articles every day through Aug 27 lamenting the difficulties faced by Arabs seeking to enter the United States. By Aug 26, Al-Khaleej, Al-Bayan, Emaratalyoum, and Emirates Today all published articles about Al-Sha,ali,s detention and return, characterizing the event as an "ordeal" for "no clear reason" and denouncing the use of "racial profiling" by the USG. In one Gulf News article, several students stated that they were "scared" to go to the U.S. for fears of being treated similarly. It does not appear, however, that this incident necessarily spawned these sentiments, as none of the students quoted as vowing to avoid the U.S. had ever considered studying there. The article quoted several other students who stated that this incident would not affect their plans, and that they would study in the U.S. if given the opportunity. Other press reports listed alleged cases of "profiling" encountered by UAE nationals in the U.S. and Europe. One reporter told PAO that he had received calls from students who wanted their stories written about; the reporter declined.

¶ 4. (C) Mary Corrado, Country Director for America-Mideast Educational and Training Services (AMIDEAST) reported to PolOff that similarly, she has heard no talk at all about this incident among the students who visit AMIDEAST in preparation for studies abroad. Dr. Warren Fox, Ministry of Higher Education adviser, told us that while people are starting to talk at the Ministry, linking the report to unhappiness about other events in the Middle East, so far none/none of the 160 UAE scholarship students have changed their minds about going to the U.S.

¶ 5. (C) Comment: The Al-Sha,ali incident has tainted the welcoming image of the United States which we seek to portray in the UAE, but seems to have a stronger impact on those predisposed to a negative view of the USG. Its significant press play clearly fosters an unhelpful atmosphere. Although all major dailies are covering the story, the Gulf News is giving the story a disproportionate amount of coverage and thus raising questions as to the paper,s reason for expanding upon one incident with such a flourish (eight of the nine stories have been by the same reporter, with the only story by another author being the one which quoted positive student comments). As Al-Sha,ali and his father have both referred to the event as "humiliating" to the family, it is likely that personal contacts within Gulf News have sparked the excessive, disproportionate coverage.

¶ 6. (C) Comment continued: The MFA had no knowledge of the incident when Charge raised it with Acting Under Secretary Tareq Al-Haidan on August 24, explaining that the circumstances of Mr. Al-Sha,ali,s detention had nothing to do with alleged profiling. Al-Haidan immediately phoned the family and came back with questions and their version of things. Charge also alerted the Abu Dhabi Crown Prince,s key international affairs advisor (Yousef Al-Otaiba) to the incident before he had heard of it from other sources or saw it in print. Although the story first appeared in the Gulf News on Thursday, August 24, it did not break in the UAE Arabic press until the next day, August 25. Since those initial approaches, and in spite of increasing press play, UAEG officials have not gone out of their way to raise the issue during several routine encounters. However, this morning (after applying for a B1/B2 visa at the Embassy) Al-Haidan did tell Charge that Emiratis were beginning to be troubled by the incident, seeing it as part of a perceived pattern of mistreatment of or discrimination against Arabs in the West. What he personally found disturbing was not the "profiling" allegation but the reports from the family "- which he found credible -- that Saif Al-Sha,ali,s wife and young children were kept in detention for 26 hours and fed only biscuits, water and a little milk. That said, Al-Haidan was proceeding with his own trip to the U.S. and there has been no indication yet that the damage done in the public arena is reflected in the conduct of our official duties.

End Comment.

¶7. (C) Action request: While there was less coverage in the Arabic press today, this story has not died. We are told that tomorrow the Gulf News journalist will have another installment in print. It would be useful at this juncture for post to have a cogent explanation of the incident that can be shared on a confidential basis with UAEG interlocutors. A releasable explanation or guidance for responding to press queries (beyond obvious points that "profiling" was not involved, the incident is not typical, and UAE students are welcome in the U.S.) would also be helpful. End action request.

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